

## Parataxis in White Hmong

Elizabeth Riddle  
Ball State University

### 1. Introduction

Verb serialization has been defined in various ways. The only points on which most linguists seem to agree are that it involves a concatenation of two or more verbs, sometimes sharing an object, and that there is no marking of subordination or coordination. One question on which linguists differ is whether a concatenation representing more than one action, event, assertion, or proposition should be considered a case of verb serialization or not, although it is generally agreed that if there is more than one action, they are closely related in some (often undefined) sense.<sup>1</sup> Linguists writing on Chinese (eg. Li and Thompson 1981, Hansell 1987) and on Southeast Asian languages, (e.g. Matisoff 1969, 1973 on Lahu, Thepkanjana 1986 on Thai, and Goral 1986, on five SEA languages) generally tend to categorize some concatenations of verbs representing two or more events as serialization. Stahlke (1970) also considers both the single and multiple event types to be cases of serialization in West African Yoruba and Yatye. In his discussion of serialization in Alamblak, a Papuan language, in terms of a continuum from phrase-like to word-like, Bruce (1988) claims that the actions or events represented by serialized verbs are perceived as closely connected parts of an overall event. Sebba (1987) discusses serialization in the creole language Sranan as well as other languages and distinguishes between coordinating serial constructions arising from VP coordination and which represent more than one action, and subordinating serial constructions, which represent a single action but which may involve several motions. Noonan (1985) distinguishes serial constructions, which he claims represent single assertions, from parataxis, which represent more than one assertion. Baker (1989: 514) concentrates on a narrow class which he calls 'serial verb construction proper,' excluding 'instances of veiled coordinations, embedded clauses, PPs, adverbs, or particles.'

A basic problem in defining serialization is thus that there are many semantically distinguishable types which exhibit the same or very similar surface patterns. In his detailed treatment of verb concatenation in Lahu, Matisoff (1969: 71) observes that serial verbs (which he calls 'versatile verbs') 'serve to provide in a uniform surface way the sort of information that in the surface grammar of languages like English is handled by a formally disparate array of subordinating devices...' Sebba (1987) poses the question: why do coordinating and subordinating serial constructions tend to occur together in languages when their phrase structure origins are (he argues) so different?

In this paper I look at verb serialization broadly defined as well as other forms of parataxis to try to understand the basis for this commonality of surface patterning. Many writers on serialization have been concerned with narrowing down the definition of serial constructions and differentiating types of verbal concatenations. I consider the phenomenon

from the opposite point of view and suggest that looking at different types of parataxis can give us some insight into the nature of verb serialization in its narrower senses. To look into this question I take White Hmong as my case study. White Hmong is an isolating Austro-Tai<sup>2</sup> language in which verb concatenation is a very important pattern of clause organization.

## 2. Serial constructions in Hmong

This section presents a brief overview of some of the typical forms and functions of serial constructions in Hmong. Consider examples (1-3).<sup>3</sup> In (1) the second verb in the series represents direction of movement, and in (2) a source. (See Li et al. 1986 for a discussion of such serial constructions in Green Hmong, a closely related dialect.) In (3) the first verb plus object has a instrumental sense.

- (1) Nws ua luam dej dhau        tus dej    lawm.  
3SG swim                    cross-over CL river PERF

'S/he swam across the river.'

- (2) ...peb yawg                    hlob Vaj Pov tau    khiav tawm    teb chaws  
we grandfather elder Vaj Pov attain run    leave country

'...our leader Vaj Pov fled the country.'

(Fuller 1985: 225, with amended gloss, translation)

- (3) Tus neeg caum ngaij tau        xuas phom tua    tus noog.  
CL hunter                    attain grasp gun kill CL bird

'The hunter killed the bird with a gun.'

(adapted from Owensby 1986: 239)

These examples illustrate types of what Foley and Van Valin (1984) call the valence-increasing function of serialization, in that the presence of an 'extra' verb permits inclusion of another nominal. The existence of this valence-increasing property does not mean that such serial verbs can only represent single actions, however. (See Riddle to appear for a fuller discussion of this point.) In fact, in the appropriate contexts, serial verbs may be independently questioned and interpreted as representing separate actions, albeit related in a single episode. This is in spite of the fact that there is no non-serial structure which could represent the notions of direction, source, and instrument. For example, either verb in example (1) can be questioned, as shown in (4) and (5):

- (4) Nws puas ua luam dej dhau        lawm?  
3SG Q    swim                    cross-over PERF

'Will s/he swim across?'

- (5) Nws ua luam dej puas dhau        lawm?  
3SG swim                    Q    cross-over PERF

'Will s/he swim (all the way) across?'

In example (4) the primary focus of the question is whether the general event of swimming took place. In (5) there is more emphasis on questioning whether the person will make it all the way to the other side or not.

Even more interesting is example (6), which is ambiguous between a one-action and a two-action interpretation:

- (6) Nws txiav nroj pov tseg.  
3SG cut weed throw abandon

'S/he cut down the weeds.'

'S/he cut down the weeds and threw them away.'  
(Johnson 1981: 19)

Another function of verb serialization is to express aspect, as in (7), where the second verb indicates continuation, augmented by the modifier ntxiv 'more'.

- (7) Ntaj piav mus ntxiv tias; '...'  
Ntaj explain go more that

'Ntaj explained further that...'  
(Lis 1986: 6)

An impressive, but by no means unusual example of the extent to which verbs can be strung together in Hmong is given in (8), where there is a series of six verbs sharing the same subject:

- (8) Yam zoo tshaj plaws mas, nej yuav tsum mus nrhiav  
thing good most TOP 2PL must go look-for  
  
nug xyuas saib luag muaj kev pab hom dabtsi nyob ncig  
ask visit see others have way help kind what be-at around  
  
ib cheeb tsam ntawm nej.  
environs at 2PL

'The best thing to do is for you to find people who live in your neighborhood who can help you with different things.'  
(Thoij 1981: preface)

Hmong also has shared object serials as discussed by Baker (1989), among others, as in (8), where luag 'others' is the shared object of four verbs. Another example is given in (9), where koj 'you' is the object of both muab 'take' and thawb 'push'.

- (9) Ib ntsis pw ces kuv mam muab koj thawb rau tom ntug.  
one moment sleep then 1SG will take 2SG push to at edge

'As soon as you're asleep I'll push you to the edge.'  
(Lis 1986: 9)

In examples (1-9) the serial verbs all have the same subjects in each

sentence. This has been claimed by some to be a defining feature of serial constructions (e.g. Noonan 1985), although other linguists recognize concatenations with different subjects as instances of serialization. When this is the case, typically the subject of the following verb is the object of the preceding. An example of this in Hmong is given in (10), where the object of the second verb, tom 'bite', which is not realized on the surface and is shared with the first verb, muab 'take', is also the subject of the stative verb tuag 'be dead', indicating the result of the biting.

- (10) ...ces txawm muab huab tais tom tuag lawm.  
then thereupon take prince bite be-dead PERF

'...then [the dogs] killed the prince (by biting him)'  
(Johnson 1981: 13)

This is a common type of serialization. Notice that this sentence has what Thepkanjana (1986) calls 'layers' of serialization. That is, one layer of serialization is formed by the first two verbs which share a subject and object, and a second with the third verb expressing the resulting state and having as its subject the object of the preceding verbs.

### 3. Motivation for serialization

One major function of serialization, noted above, is valence expansion. Sebba (1987) claims that the other major function of serialization is lexicon expansion. Foley (1986) points out that some Papuan languages have comparatively few verb stems and that serialization compensates for this lack. Hmong has a very restricted morpheme structure which limits the number of possible non-compounded words, and in general, most free morphemes are monosyllabic. This might be proposed as a reason for why a serial construction is used in example (11) to express the meaning of 'show':

- (11) Nws...muab daim ntawv uas muaj nws tus niam hlus  
3SG take CL paper that have 3SG CL younger-sister

qhov chaw nyob rau tus poj niam ntawd saib  
place live to CL woman that see

'She showed the paper with her younger sister's address on it  
to that woman.'  
(Thoij 1981: 18)

However, there are three other verbs which can be used in different specific situations which would often be translated by the general verb 'show' in English.

Thus Hmong has instances of verbal concatenation which appear not to fulfill either the valence or lexicon expansion functions. For example, consider again example (8), which has a series of six verbs. Why are there so many verbs in this sentence? Valence expansion is not a factor, since the same NP luag 'others' could appear as the object of any of the four verbs meaning 'look for', 'ask', 'visit' or 'see' in independent sentences. Lexicon expansion also seems irrelevant, since it is clear that in this instance Hmong has plenty of relevant verbs, and a nonserializing language

such as English does not seem to have a particular verb lacking in Hmong which would express more succinctly even part of this series. Foley and Van Valin (1984) claim that serialization is used in most languages mainly to construct complex verb units expressing composite semantic notions. This explanation has some intuitive appeal here but is very slippery, since it is difficult to define what is meant by composite. I suspect that it is more generally applicable to languages in which there are nonserial alternatives for expressing the same basic propositions, thus affording representation as relatively more or relatively less composite in the speaker's point of view. Hmong, on the other hand, generally lacks such alternatives, and some concatenations seem much less composite than others. Also, none of these factors gives us any insight into why other forms of parataxis are often very common in serializing languages such as Hmong as well.

I suggest that there is an additional factor motivating the very strong preference of Hmong for serialization. This is that it is a stylistic norm in Hmong (Mottin 1978, Johns and Strecker 1987), as in other languages of the region, (Matisoff 1973) to repeat words and phrases and paratactically string together synonymous or related words. These are called 'elaborate expressions' (Haas 1964). Elaboration occurs both as a productive pattern in everyday Hmong conversation and in fixed expressions in casual and elegant speech. Example (12) is taken from an oral narrative and is an example of a productive pattern of elaboration.

- (12) ...tso            kwv            tso            tij  
           relinquish younger-brother relinquish older-brother
- tso            txiv    tseg  
           relinquish father abandon
- '...leave one's relatives behind'  
 (Fuller 1985: 232-3, with amended gloss)

The verb tso 'relinquish' or 'leave,' which occurs three times, is part of a serial construction formed with tseg 'abandon', and the elements are joined paratactically. Both the repetition of the verb and the use of three NPs referring to specific relatives to include all relatives emphasize the sadness of the refugee's situation.

Examples (13-15) are some typical fixed elaborate expressions:

- (13) Khwv iab    khwv daw  
       toil bitter toil salty
- 'arduous toil'  
 (Johns and Strecker 1987: 106)
- (14) Kav teb kav chaw  
       rule land rule place
- 'to rule a country'  
 (Johns and Strecker 1987: 106)

- (15) tuag tshaib    tuag nqhis  
die to hunger die to thirst

'starve to death'

(Mottin 1978: 198, my translation from the French)

In each of the above cases a verb is repeated and the elements of the expression are simply juxtaposed. This parallels the concatenation of verbs in serial constructions. (See Johns and Strecker 1987 and Ratliff 1986a, b for a more complete discussion of the types and sources of elaborate expressions in Hmong.)

Reduplication for emphasis is also common in Hmong, as in example (16):

- (16) Koj txawj txawj ua paj ntaub.  
2SG know know do embroidery

'You really know how to do embroidery'

(i.e. you embroider very well)

Again, the surface pattern is that of simple concatenation. I am suggesting that an important reason for why Hmong strings together verbs as in example (8) is this general tendency to form lexically elaborate utterances, and it does so paratactically. Each verb contributes a particular sense lacking in another given verb, and thus elaborates on the meanings of the others, making the characterization of a particular event more precise, but the problem is not lack of lexical items per se. In many of the examples where Hmong has a serial construction, the words used to translate it into English are equally general or equally specific in meaning. For example, in instrumental constructions, Hmong can have any one of three or four verbs with different specific lexical meanings similar to the differences among take, grasp, hold, and use in English. The choice depends on the particular context. In other words, I claim that there is a connection between serialization and the tendency to elaborate utterances with additional words, resulting in an overt specification of subparts of an overall event or state of affairs which is not found to the same degree in a language like English. While it is true that in a number of cases (particularly with motion verbs) the meaning expressed by a single verb in English (e.g. take including motion as well as grasping or holding) is divided among two words in Hmong (e.g. muab 'take in hand' and mus 'go'), this is not true in other instances. In many examples the English translations simply leave unspecified some of the subparts of a situation overtly described in Hmong, even though equally general lexical items exist in Hmong as well.

Another example of a verb serialization providing elaboration of meaning is given in (17). This sentence is from a novel and is said by a father to his young son who is afraid to leave the area where his father is plowing and go to the edge of the field to play.

- (17) Kuv mam zov    ntsia koj mus.  
1SG will guard watch 2SG go

'I'll watch you go.'

(Lis 1986: 3)

On the literal level, ntsia could be used alone to mean 'watch' as in the English translation; however, this would not overtly specify the component of the situation in which the father is taking care of the son by watching; therefore, the verb zov expressing this idea is included as well. It is not that in English only one word lexicalizes the meaning of two in Hmong, but that the English sentence is vague in comparison to the Hmong sentence.

Consider also example (18), where the object of rau 'to' is the subject of nloog 'listen'. The verb meaning 'listen' is obligatorily present and does not have a specifically purpose sense. This might not be considered a case of verb serialization by some linguists since a prepositional phrase comes between the first and second verbs. However, nloog 'listen' is paratactically joined to the rest of the sentence and its subject is also the object of rau 'to' and the indirect object of the first verb.<sup>4</sup>

- (18) Nws nyeem ntawv rau kuv niam nloog.  
3SG read book to 1SG mother listen

'S/he's reading to my mother.'  
(Strecker and Vang 1986: 14)

Unlike in English, one cannot just say the equivalent of 'read to my mother' in Hmong. It is necessary to overtly specify the act performed by the referent of the object of rau 'to' here. I suggest that this is a form of elaboration.

To summarize, lexical elaboration in paratactic form is a very common rhetorical device in Hmong, and some serial constructions appear to have elaboration as their primary function.

#### 4. Other forms of parataxis

Paralleling serialization, which is a form of verb phrase parataxis, is full clause parataxis, as in (19). The first clause, which ends with los 'come' and has an internal serial structure, is joined paratactically to the next part of the sentence, which also exhibits serialization, and is paratactically joined to the last part of the sentence starting with tsis tau noj 'not get eat'. There are no markers of subordination or coordination.

- (19) Leej twg txawj txuag tau me ntsis nyiaj los nws coj  
someone able preserve get little money come 3SG take

mus muas tsis tau noj tsis tau hnaw.  
go buy not get eat not get wear

'If anyone manages to save a little money and goes to buy something, s/he won't get anything to eat or wear.'  
(Haiv Hmoob staff 1987: 46)

Time adverbials are usually complex NPs simply juxtaposed to the rest of the sentence, as in (20), where the adverbial is introduced by the word thaum, often translated as 'when' or 'while' but which in Hmong is a noun

meaning 'time' and is followed by a relative clause.

- (20) Koj yuav tsum tsis txhob tsav lum fais thaum uas tseem  
 2SG must not drive car time that still  
 noj cov tshuav no.  
 eat GRP medicine this

'You should not drive while taking this medicine.'  
 (Xiong, 1980: 21)

Another form for time adverbials is that of an existential clause which could syntactically stand alone and is paratactic to the main clause, as in (21):

- (21) Muaj ib taig kis nws tuaj.  
 have 1 morning 3SG come

'One morning s/he came'.

Hmong also forms possessives by simply juxtaposing the possessor NP before the possessed NP, most often with the latter's classifier, but in a few cases (primarily for some kinship terms) without. This is illustrated in (22) and (23):

- (22) Xia lub tsev  
 Xia CL house

'Xia's house'

- (23) Kuv niam  
 1SG mother

'my mother'

Topic NPs of the 'double subject' type are another type of parataxis, as shown in (24):

- (24) Txoj kev kawm ntawv nyob teb chaws no kuv cov me nyuam  
 CL way study be-at country this 1SG GRP child

puav leej yog kawm zoo rau qhov...  
 all person be learn good because

'Studying in this country, all my children are learning very well because...'  
 (Fuller 1985: 161-2, with amended gloss, translation)

Here a topic NP is juxtaposed to a subject NP with no indication of subordination or coordination.

As can be seen from the examples discussed so far, Hmong has a very strong tendency to string items together paratactically. It does have several complementizers which signal subordinate relationships, but their



significance as subordinators is limited in some ways. For example, the use of the subordinating complementizers tias and hais tias is more limited than English that and to are. Moreover, tias has a quotative use (Li 1988) and the hais of hais tias is historically derived from a still existing homophonous verb of saying. Although now it is fairly grammaticized as part of the complementizer (Jaisser 1984), it is still transparently related to the primary verb of saying in Hmong and its position in the sentence is that of a serial verb. Another complementizer, kom, used primarily to show causation, also occurs as a verb in a closely related meaning. Finally, there is one invariant relative clause marker which is often deleted and the resulting string ends up in a paratactic relationship to the adjacent clause, appearing to form a layer of serialization. This can be seen in example 8. Here luag 'others' is the object of the serialized verb saib 'see' and the subject of muaj 'have,' which is the verb of a (semantically) a relative clause. (See Riddle 1989 for a discussion of the conditions on the occurrence of the relative marker.) In short, there are very few words which clearly function as subordinating conjunctions in Hmong.

##### 5. Target structure

Based on the prevalence of parataxis at so many levels of syntactic structure, I suggest that Hmong can be described as having a paratactic surface target structure. The concept of target structure has appeared in various guises in linguistic theory, but has been most clearly articulated for syntax by Green (1974, 1980) and Haiman (1974). It is related to the notion of phonological conspiracy as discussed by Kisseberth (1970), among others. A target structure arises when several distinct rules 'conspire' to produce the same result in surface structure. For example, Green (1980) claims that there are two target inversion structures in English derived from a large variety of underlying structures. Haiman argues that the verb second position in German main clauses is a target structure. What I am proposing is that Hmong has a preferred pattern of syntactic organization for the language as a whole, i.e. parataxis. Serial verb constructions, whether narrowly or broadly defined, are a reflection of the paratactic target structure, and this surface pattern in effect neutralizes semantically distinct verb concatenation structures.

##### Notes

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1. It should be noted here that it is very difficult to distinguish numbers of actions or events in any clearcut way.

2. The affiliation of Hmong is disputed, with some linguists classifying it as Sino-Tibetan. White Hmong is one of two mutually intelligible varieties spoken in Laos and Thailand. Other more distantly related Hmong languages are spoken in China and Vietnam. Henceforth I will refer to the variety discussed in this paper simply as Hmong.

3. Standard White Hmong orthography is used. Final consonants or lack thereof indicate tones, as follows: b = high level; j = high falling; Ø = mid level; s = low level; v = low rising; m = low checked; g = breathy; d = rising and lower than v. For the most part, Hmong is written with a space between each syllable. The following abbreviations are used: SG = singular; PL = plural; CL = classifier; GRP = group classifier; TOP = topic marker; PERF = perfective; COMP = complementizer; Q = question marker.

4. Rau is glossed here as a preposition but it is homophonous with a main verb meaning 'to place,' and some of the contexts where it is used seem vague between the verbal and prepositional meanings. It also occurs in examples 9 and 11. See Lord (1973) for a diachronic perspective on this phenomenon, and Li and Thompson (1981) for a discussion of coverbs in Chinese as representing a separate word class intermediate between verbs and prepositions.

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